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ABSTRACT

Noting that viewing reading as a communicative act can heighten educators' awareness of the ways in which one story can be embedded within another, this report presents and discusses several examples of stories within stories. The report discusses the various participants communicating in a story within a story--the real and implied authors and the real and implied readers--and the rhetorical devices that create such stories, including explicit embedding, commentary, irony, unengaged metaphor, engaged metaphor, immersion, and in-effect narration. The report then presents analyses of several basal readers and trade books in terms of embedded stories, and concludes that basal readers neither provide a full range of stories for children nor prepare them for the story types they will encounter later. (FL)

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF READING

Reading Education Report No. 29

STORIES WITHIN STORIES

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Stories Within Stories

Often in research on reading, or in the teaching of reading, we start with the obvious, such as the need for letters to be recognized. Later we teach, and children learn, how letters are the units of words; words, the units of sentences; sentences, the units of paragraphs; and paragraphs, the units of whole texts.

Because of the laboriousness of this process of building from letters to whole texts, we sometimes forget that texts are but the manifestation of an author's attempt to communicate; that the author has a personality, with beliefs about the world which include beliefs about the reader as well as a purpose in writing. Moreover, we tend to forget the reader, whose purpose in reading and beliefs about the author and the world in general interact with the goals and beliefs of the author. While acknowledging the importance of decoding, grammar, and the like in reading, it is still safe to say that the realm of the author-reader interactions plays a major role in influencing comprehension and enjoyment of texts.

An alternative to the "bottom-up" approach to reading just outlined is to start from the "top-down," that is, to view reading first of all as an act of communication and to try to understand the participants in this act.

Taking the latter approach, we soon discover that the number of "participants" communicating in a story is much greater than one might first suspect. This occurs because what appears at first to be a single story is often a complex set of stories within stories, each one with its distinct author and reader.

Participants in Communication

A striking example of the way stories can be embedded within stories is Henry James's The Turn of the Screw (see Figure 1). The real author of the story is obviously Henry James, who writes for the real reader (R[0] in Figure 1). But the author we perceive is only an implied author (Booth, 1961), a persona James necessarily creates by the act of writing down his story. We can never know for certain how closely the implied beliefs and goals of the implied author match those of the real Henry James.

The implied author talks to an implied reader (R[1] in Figure 1). Again, although the implied reader may be similar to the real reader, they are not identical. For example, James' implied reader probably lived many years ago. (For convenience, in Figure 1, the implied persona is shown by putting a name in quotes.)

Now we have four participants to consider, the real author, the real reader, the implied author, and the implied reader. But

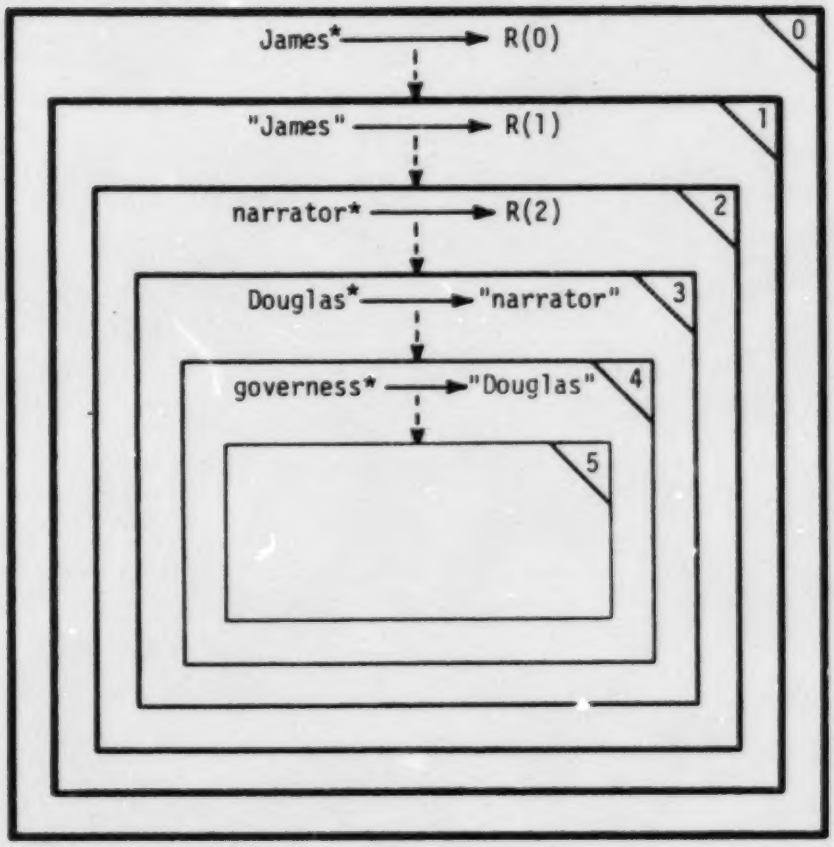

Figure 1. Rhetorical structure for James's The Turn of the Screw.

there is more. The Turn of the Screw is told in first person, by a character whom we might call the narrator. The narrator gives an account of his encounters with Douglas, who, in turn, begins to tell, and then reads, a ghost story written by a governess. Each of these characters, the narrator, Douglas, and the governess, is a story-teller. Each presents his or her story to a specific audience. The narrator talks to the implied implied reader (R[2] in Figure 1); Douglas talks to the narrator; and the governess talks (writes her letter) to Douglas. Thus, we have at least five levels of communication, or stories within stories.

Rhetorical Devices that Create Stories within Stories

The embedding of stories within stories is more common than one might expect. Even among trade books written for elementary school children we have found that about half of the stories involve embeddings beyond the implied author-implied reader level. This becomes more apparent when we consider the variety of means by which authors in effect introduce additional stories within stories (Bruce, in press).

One way is explicit embedding. In Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," the implied author introduces a text supposedly written by an historian, Diedrich Knickerbocker. Perhaps this aids the reader's suspension of disbelief; it is not Washington Irving, a noted writer of fiction, who tells us this strange

story, but Diedrich Knickerbocker, a reliable historian, who only reports the facts. Other forms of explicit embedding result from the occurrence within a text of diaries, letters, books, secret manuscripts, tablets, or other written documents.

A second device which adds a story level is commentary by the author, as when the implied author in Benjamin Bunny says, "I cannot draw you a picture of Peter and Benjamin, because it was quite dark. . . " Although it is sometimes difficult to draw the line between commentary and the necessary role of the implied author as a describer and reporter (see Booth, 1961), it is clear that when readers feel commentary is occurring, they also begin to feel the implied author as a character. In the example, we begin to see Potter's persona as a character in a story about the writing of Benjamin Bunny. That story has its own implied author; i.e., the writer who has written in such a way that we are able to imagine a character who writes stories about rabbits.

Irony is a third rhetorical device that has among its effects the addition of a level of narrative. That is, when we recognize that the implied author or the narrator is saying something intended to be interpreted as naive, ridiculous, or short-sighted, then we may infer the presence of a higher-level implied author or narrator. For example, in Jonathan Swift's satire "A Modest Proposal," we read about the outrageous idea of

eating babies. If we view the writing as ironic, then we see that the putative author's position is being satirized. The satirizer is the implied author; thus the author of the proposal is the implied implied author.

A fourth device that creates additional levels is the introduction of an unengaged narrator, that is, a character who narrates but is not a participant in the story. When Douglas tells the governess's story, in The Turn of the Screw, he is telling a story but not participating in its events.

Introducing an engaged narrator is a fifth way to create an additional level of rhetorical structure. It is easily recognizable since the narration is in the first person. Engaged narration also facilitates irony since it permits the presentation of a fully defined storyteller at a level separate from the implied author. It also provides a convincing rationale for exploring one character's perceptions in depth. However, the deep examination of one character is coupled with a shallower look at other characters. Furthermore, not all events can be presented conveniently since the narrator is necessarily limited in his or her physical presence. Limitations of this sort have led to interesting stratagems by authors. In Treasure Island, Stevenson resorts to a blatant switch of engaged narrators: Most of the story is told by Jim Hawkins, but three chapters are related by a Doctor Livesay.

Immersion is a sixth device for creating additional levels. It occurs when an author puts the reader into a story using second person pronouns or imperatives. Immersion occurs in instructions, but also in the "you are the hero" type books such as Packard's Deadwood City and Sugarcane Island. Recognition of the use of immersion can lead the reader to feel the presence of a new character, the reader who is engaged in the story, as opposed to the original implied reader.

The seventh device appears in stories in which we see the world so much through the mind of one character that we feel that he or she is in effect narrating the story. This device, in-effect narration, also causes an extra level to be constructed. A good example can be seen in Beverly Cleary's Ramona the Brave. Although the story is told in third person, sections of it have the feel of a first person narration since everything is reported and evaluated through Ramona's mind.

Stories for Children

There are, of course, many fine stories which have only the real author and the implied author levels (narrator-less stories). However, such stories are essentially more abstract than stories which introduce one or more stories within stories

with their corresponding narrators because they do not provide a distinct storyteller with whom a reader can interact. Moreover, they do not prepare children for the more complex stories-within-stories, such as The Turn of the Screw or Winnie-the-Pooh. Thus, it would seem ineffective to have this type predominate among stories given to children to read.

Yet, in analyses of children's stories (Steinberg & Bruce, 1980; Bruce, Note 1) we found that in basal readers, which are texts designed to teach children to read, the narratorless stories do, in fact, predominate. In one sample of 150 basal stories from three leading series and 50 trade books (most from the International Reading Association/Children's Book Council Children's Choices list) we found a marked difference between the types of narration found in trade books and those found in the basal stories (see Table 1).

When only the major narrative types for each story were considered, four types appeared: (a) narratorless stories of the kind just described, (b) unengaged narration, as in A. A. Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh, (c) in-effect narration, as in Ramona the Brave, and (d) engaged narration, as in Marjorie Weinman Sharmat's Nate the Great. Narratorless stories were the most common type overall, but in the trade books other types appeared frequently. In the basals, on the other hand, the narratorless stories predominated, even in Grades 4 and 5.

Table 1

Percentages of Stories of Different Narrative Types

Text Group	Narrator-less	Unengaged Narrator	In-effect Narrator	Engaged Narrator
Basals				
Grades 1-3	91.1	2.2	2.2	4.4
Grades 4-5	71.7	1.7	11.7	15.0
Trades				
Grades 1-3	63.3	0	10.0	26.7
Grades 4-5	40.0	5.0	20.0	35.0

These results are only one way to view the multifaceted character of stories. They do suggest however, that basals are not providing a full range of stories for children. The complaint sometimes made that early reading materials do not prepare children for reading expository texts may now be augmented: These materials may not be preparing children for the important story types either.

Conclusion

Viewing reading as a communicative act can heighten our awareness of the ways in which one story can be embedded within another. This can add to our appreciation and understanding of stories and, in turn, to our understanding of the communicative function of texts. Such an understanding can help children become more successful users of the language.

The view of stories presented here highlights the need for diversity in stories made available to children. One way to achieve this is by reading aloud to children. A number of studies (see McCormick, 1977) have shown a positive relationship between reading orally to children and children's subsequent reading ability. The application of literary analyses to children's stories suggests that one reason for this is that in

addition to motivating children, reading aloud exposes them to types of stories they might not otherwise encounter.

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